

The Hill, March 3, 2009

Several lawmakers said Monday that the newly opened Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) has become an impediment to constituents touring the Capitol, at times turning them away.

“In an apparent attempt to justify its own existence, the Capitol Visitor Center staff is using the expansion of the CVC to actually make it harder for Americans to see our nation’s Capitol,” said Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.).

“Members’ offices now are forced to schedule tours around the schedule of the CVC staff instead of the schedule of our constituents, with little leeway for last-minute changes.”

Kirk and Rep. David Loebsack (D-Iowa) wrote a letter Monday airing their grievances to the Architect of the Capitol (AOC), which oversees the CVC.

The CVC tour guides, or “Red Coats” (so named for the color of their jackets), make it harder for visitors to tour the Capitol than it was before the CVC opened, said the lawmakers.

Visitors wanting to tour the Capitol are required to make a reservation with a CVC tour guide or are allowed to tour with a member’s staff if they have been trained by the CVC. Before the CVC opened, constituents would contact their lawmaker’s office and either make an appointment or in some instances just show up to tour with a staffer.

By limiting the number of available tours, many visiting groups who show up without a reservation or arrive late and are turned away by CVC staff, the letter said.

“For the Red Coats to tell constituents, ‘Oh by the way, you brought your family all the way to Washington but you can’t see the Capitol that you paid for because of our rules and

restrictions,' it's time to fire the Red Coats," Kirk said.

A CVC official said though he had not seen the lawmakers' letter, that the center was "doing everything possible to accommodate" members' requests.

As the CVC continues to refine its tour reservation policies, officials want to add more time slots that can only be reserved through a lawmaker's office throughout the day said Tom Fontana a spokesman for the CVC. He also encouraged visitors and staffers to check back frequently if tours are booked up because slots become available due to cancellations and "no shows."

The CVC expects to see about 3 million visitors come through its doors over the next year, according to officials. With a cafeteria and two movie theaters, the 580,000-square-foot space was designed in part to make the visitor experience more comfortable and user-friendly. But the center has not been without controversy as it opened in December after years of delays and under-budgeting made it a point of contention for many lawmakers.

With Congress' Spring recess coming up in April, Kirk said he expects House leadership to get behind his request to ease the tour rules and make staff-led tours an easier option for visitors.

"I think most leaders are suddenly realizing when they talk to their own staffers what a train wreck spring break looks like," Kirk said, adding that he would propose a legislative fix to the problem if the AOC would not agree to loosen restrictions on making staff-led tours more easily honored.

"So we have to fix this pretty quickly otherwise we're going to have thousands of Americans who won't be allowed to see the Capitol because of the Red Coats."

Fontana agreed that the center was approaching its first peak tourist season, but added that wait time for visitors has decreased significantly.

“Before the CVC opened, hundreds and sometimes thousands of visitors were turned away as early as 9:30 a.m. because all public tour passes for the day had been distributed,” he said. “As a result, members’ offices tried to accommodate their constituents by offering a staff-led tour.

“When staff members were able to accommodate these visitors, groups often had to wait up to two hours in the Cannon tunnel before they could enter the U.S. Capitol. Even on a peak day two weeks ago, when close to 10,000 people visited the Capitol, the average wait to enter the Visitor Center was only six minutes.”

Members’ staff must go through a training process by the CVC staff if they want to be authorized to give tours, according to Kirk’s office.

But, he said, most congressional staff don’t have the time to take the training, which he said is not very educational.

“There’re some helpful items regarding public safety, but the rest is stupid,” Kirk said of the training. “There’s nothing about value added on the actual history of the Capitol.”

The AOC’s office did not return a request for comment by press time.

Fontana said the tour was an important part of familiarizing staff with the CVC and its processes.

“Close to 1,700 staffers have been trained and are leading well-informed and compelling tours while being fully versed in evacuation routes and emergency procedures,” he said.

“Equally important, the staffers who have participated in the training have had the opportunity to become familiar with the CVC and are better prepared to share its many amenities and educational opportunities with their constituents.”